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BEST BOOKS, GIFT BOOKS

Popular Music

Anthologies that rock: Now and then

By Dan DeLuca
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay (W.W. Norton & Co., $35) doesn't have a whole lot to say about the state of the music right now — profiles of Courtney Love and Kurt Cobain, a celebration of Marilyn Manson, a Beastie Boys interview and an Irvine Welsh ecstasy rave are the only flirtations with the contemporary.

But despite a corny title and only passing interest in hip-hop, the 94-piece anthology edited by University of Florida journalism professor William McKeen succeeds in gathering some of the best pop-music writing that's ever appeared in print.

Big-name critics — Lester Bangs, Peter Guralnick and Robert Christgau — are well-represented, and McKeen republishes articles that are historical artifacts: Nik Cohn's 1976 New York magazine piece that inspired *Saturday Night Fever*, and the 1966 London Evening Standard story in which John Lennon boasted that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus."

It also gives voice to novelists (Welsh, Nick Hornby, Roddy Doyle, William S. Burroughs and Don DeLillo), groupies (Pamela Des Barres) and songwriters ("Heartbreak Hotel" author Mae Boren Axton).

Better still, it gives ink to the artists themselves. The book starts with Bob Dylan's snide liner notes to his 1965 *Bringing It All Back Home* — "if someone thinks norman mailer is more important than hank williams, that's fine. I have no arguments an I never drink milk" — and includes Frank Zappa testimony, Patti Smith poems, and Robert Johnson lyrics.

Best Music Writing 2000
Edited by Peter Guralnick
Da Capo, $14.

A partial remedy for *Rock and Roll*'s focus on the past is *Best Music Writing 2000*. Edited and featuring another foreword by Guralnick, the 428-page compendium is a winning mixture of the obvious and the offbeat, with Puff Daddy and Madonna interviews and profiles of country songwriter Cindy Walker and record collector Joe Bussard.

Ashley Kahn sets the scene for the making of Miles Davis' masterpiece with a biography and a look at the culture of Columbia Records.

Let It Blurt
By Jim DeRogatis
Broadway, $15.95

A Whore Just Like the Rest
By Richard Meltzer
Da Capo, $17.

The Nick Tosches Reader
By Nick Tosches
Da Capo, $18.95

Considering he's been dead since 1982, Lester Bangs had a pretty good year. The scribe described as "the great innovative, comic poet of rock criticism" was portrayed by Phillip Seymour Hoffman in *Almost Famous* and was lionized all over again in Jim DeRogatis' well-researched and awestruck *Let It Blurt*. Bangs pals Richard Meltzer and Nick Tosches didn't do badly in 2000, either. Both Meltzer's bilious and occasionally brilliant *A Whore Just Like the Rest* and *The Nick Tosches Reader* collect works by innovative and indulgent critics still able to dazzle with stylistic derring-do.

Christgau's Consumer Guide
Albums of the '90s
By Robert Christgau
St. Martin's Griffin, $19.95

Collected Works
A Journal of Jazz 1954-2000
By Whitney Balliett
St. Martin's Press, $40

Too often, anthologized mutterings of music critics tell us lots about the critics and little about the music. These are two important exceptions. Robert Christgau, who has been tracking rock and other movements for the Village Voice since linotype days, is a master of the informative one-paragraph briefing disguised as an album review. Blending historical context, sharp analysis and vinegary sociological commentary, his summaries are gems of concision. Christgau doesn't include just the "important" music — he spills passionate ink on everything from Mariah Carey to Ruben Gonzales to obscure East African guitarists who surfaced on one compilation in 1991.

Were the recent editorial regimes at the New Yorker a tad more interested in jazz, Balliett might have been able to follow Christgau with an entire volume devoted to the '90s. Alas, Balliett has been scarce in the magazine's pages of late. That doesn't diminish the importance of this chronological career retrospective, which offers studied, sparkling descriptions of jazz improvisers at work. The pieces from the 1950s bubble over with the qualities that make Balliett the most important chronicler of jazz ever — his ear for intense detail, his knack for rendering the mood of a performance, his love for the characters behind the music.

— Tom Moon

The Beatles Anthology
By the Beatles
Chronicle Books, $60

The Beatles in Rishikesh
By Paul Saltzman
Viking Studio, $30

This year's Beatles-related gift-giving choices come in two sizes: The extra-large *Anthology*, and an interesting slimmer volume on the group's pilgrimage to an ashram in India. The *Anthology* links interviews and recollections of the Beatles with rare photos and artifacts found while researching the corresponding TV special. *The Beatles in Rishikesh* focuses on an extraordinary journey to a three-week meditation course with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968. Saltzman snapped as the Fab Four prayed and played. While the recollections are a tad breathless, the pictures capture the more casual interactions among the four when they weren't busy being Beatles.

— T.M.

The Rough Guide
World Music Vol. 1 and 2
Rough/Penguin, $26.95

The Rough Guides are near-perfect reference works, augmenting the usual artist career entries with smart discussions of specialized genres. This year brings a country edition and an update of the flagship world music effort. Both are essential. The world offering is split into two books — one covering Africa, Europe and the Middle East, the other North America, the Caribbean, India and Asia. The result is more depth, more extensive discographies, and break-out profiles of such major figures as Brazil's Caetano Veloso.

— T.M.

Kind of Blue
The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece
By Ashley Kahn
Da Capo, $23.

Kind of Blue is arguably the most influential jazz album of all time, the moment when Miles Davis distilled provocative ideas about modernism in jazz into pure contemplative expression. Ashley Kahn endeavors to show how it happened — setting the scene with a crisp Davis biography and an "interlude" looking at the culture at Columbia Records. Kahn has ideas of his own, but wisely leans on musicians — notably Bill Evans and John Scofield — to put the work in context and gauge its impact.

— T.M.

The strength of William McKeen's book is that it allows the artists themselves a voice, in addition to critics and novelists.

Best candidates put forth by Y2K

BEST BOOKS from K1

Belleisles' brilliantly researched finding — that gun ownership in America was rare until the 1830s, even on the frontier — remain to be seen. As expected, the NRA quickly mounted a delegitimization campaign to lessen the book's impact on contemporary debates about gun control, but it fizzled in the face of some of the most lustrous superlatives ever handed out by top scholars of American history.

Michael Kammen, a past president of the Organization of American Historians, described *Arming America* as "an astonishingly original and innovative book ... certain to endure as a classic work." Peter Onuf, the distinguished Jefferson scholar, judged it a "myth-busting tour de force." Inquirer reviewer Tom Engelhardt wrote that "historians will argue for years about his version of how America armed itself."

It's inevitable that a book as profoundly praised as Bellesiles' will be taught, assigned, and slowly absorbed into conventional wisdom. That will surely, over time, weaken public resistance to stricter regulation of guns in America, and stiffen politicians' spines in addressing supposedly sacrosanct Second Amendment rights.

From the book jacket

In nonfiction, "Arming America" rebutted long-held beliefs and revved up the NRA.

In fiction, the most important book also failed to win an official literary prize, if you don't count the biggest one of all: rapturous attention from the New York Times, which normally triggers a world-wide snowball effect among arts media.

In the case of Zadie Smith's **White Teeth** (Random House, $24.95), the book earned its praise and impact.

The first novel by a 24-year-old black graduate of Cambridge University, *White Teeth* arrived as an exuberant, ambitious, daringly imaginative and colloquially deft English novel, but one about the real North London of today, where Jamaicans and Muslim Bengalis and Indians mix and match. Its novelistic genius flowed through Smith's scenes and sentences, plumbing personalities and cultures traditionally missing from our *Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

More than Rushdie, more than Ishiguro, Smith managed with her fabulous tale of two interwoven families, the Joneses and the Iqbals, to shut down permanently the pause vision of the English novel as something handed down from Fielding to Trollope to Powell to Drabble and so on. *White Teeth* didn't just land on bookshop shelves — it set up shop on the time line of English literature, and will remain there.

From the book jacket

"White Teeth" gives new meaning to the phrase "English novel."

Questions in American life, of course, come with automatic follow-ups. What runner-ups round out the top ten?

As in every year, nonfiction books slated to last far exceed the space available to note them. The differences come in the depth of the indented dimples they left on the culture. But forced to certify four runners-up by the witching hour, one submits.

Jacques Barzun's **From Dawn to Decadence** (HarperCollins, $36), despite its 877-page girth, will probably become the standard liberal-arts story of modernity for those who want theirs between two covers, an analogue to Will Durant's never out-of-print classic, *The Story of Philosophy*. Garry Wills' **Papal Sin** (Doubleday, $25), fueled by that fearless public intellectual's vinegary courage, took on two of American media's sacred cows — the Pope and the Catholic Church — and dared to cite chapter and verse on the evils perpetrated by one organized religion.

Other excellent efforts crowd the mind, among them Scott Malcomson's **One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race**; T.M. Luhrmann's **Of Two Minds: The Growing Disorder in American Psychiatry**; and Robert Putnam's **Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community**.

But the final two slots fall to a pair of magisterial books destined to dominate future discussion in their areas. One is Elazar Barkan's **The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices** (Norton, $29.95), primed to become a bible for all, from Holocaust survivors to African American activists, who believe reparations for historical wrongdoing are possible.

The other is Tom Segev's recently published **One Palestine Complete: Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate** (Metropolitan, $35). Like two of the Israeli author's earlier books, *The First Israelis* and *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, it is a classic ready to revolutionize our view of Middle East rights and obligations.

On the fiction short list, similar criteria of importance, excellence and cultural sway hold to winnow many volumes.

Because cutting-edge French fiction will always matter to world literature, the publication here of **The Elementary Particles** (Alfred A. Knopf, $25) by Michel Houellebecq, France's hot new literary/philosophical figure, counts as an event. It's a novel fated to win Kundera and Camus readers despite its Gallic rejection of crowd-pleasing American literary techniques.

The American novelist sure to be seen as a Pynchon-like giant in 20 years, Richard Powers, published yet another mind-stretching novel, **Plowing the Dark** (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $25), set to join the part of American literature that will be be collected works. In a close call between Margaret Atwood's **The Blind Assassin** and Francine Prose's tone-perfect National Book Award nominee, **Blue Angel** (HarperCollins, $35), one opts for the latter because it nudged Prose toward a status bankable in the future: that she's one of the finest, brainiest novelists of our era. Finally, if radically, one ends the list with Steve Martin's **Shopgirl** (Hyperion, $17.95), that stark, melancholy, not-so-wild-and-crazy novella by the actor/comic still visualized by most Americans with an arrow through his head.

For the first time since the early New Yorker writing days of Woody Allen, a mass-market show-business star is seriously trying to establish himself in the old-fashioned art form of literature — to sit at what smug literati still perceive as the grown-up's table of art.

That a showbiz star could even harbor such an aim as we approach Y2Kplus! — flying in the face of so many hip cultural cliches — takes on an importance all its own.

Audio Books *By Sandy Bauers*

A versatile gift idea: Anything about Harry Potter

This year, there's a virtually foolproof audio book that can be given across the board, to young and old alike.

You don't even have to remember anything complicated. Just one familiar name will do: Harry Potter.

What!? Doesn't everyone already have all the J.K. Rowling books about the young, mistreated orphan who finds out he's really a famous wizard!

No. What about Grandma, for instance? She's probably been wondering what these kids have been carrying on about and never realized she might enjoy listening while she knits — or rides her Exercycle. At the very least, it gives her something to help her bond with the grandchildren. Ditto Grandpa.

Double-ditto parents, who can use the commute to and from work to hear what their children are reading. The recordings are also perfect for a car trip.

As for children, the biggest fans of all, even if they have the printed versions, many don't have the audio versions, and narrator Jim Dale will be a treat. Dale is a top-notch narrator who exudes warmth, charm and delight.

He brings an extra dimension to the books. Anyone who has only read the print versions will find them all the more enjoyable on audio.

Dale has narrated all the Potter audios for Random House, from the first, released on audio in the fall of '99, **Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone** (8 hours, $33), to the last for the time being, released in July, **Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire** (20.5 hours, $39.95).

(No need to worry about giving a present someone already has. If the child on your list had the audio version, you'd know it because he or she would have been talking about Dale nearly incessantly to anyone who presented the least excuse to bring it up.)

All the Harry recordings — and all the following gift suggestions — are available at bookstores.

Good fiction that lends itself perfectly to the audio format is **The Night Listener** (9 hours, $34.95, Harper) by Armistead Maupin. It's the story of a long-distance telephone friendship between a radio personality and a young boy who was sexually abused and has AIDS. Underlying the plot is an exploration of the power of voice — a nice touch for a book released first as a Web site/audio stream.

Although the veterinarian who wrote as James Herriot died a few years ago, publishers always manage to bring out a new collection this time of year. The latest, just released from Audio Renaissance, is **James Herriot's World of Animals** (9 hours, $29.95) read by Christopher Timothy.

A worthy successor to *The Perfect Storm* and all the Ernest Shackleton Antarctica books is **In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex**, which Penguin recorded both abridged (6 hours, $24.95, read by Ed Herrmann) and unabridged (9 hours, $34.95, read by Scott Brick). Set in 1820, this is historian Nathaniel Philbrick's harrowing account of survival for the crew of a ship sunk by a whale.

The hightbrow on your list may have already purchased the print version of Seamus Heaney's new translation of **Beowulf**, but an extra morsel would be the audio abridgment read by the poet himself (2¼ hours, $18.95, HighBridge). It's thick with gory detail and gruesome encounters.

Armchair adventurers would be pleased with any of the new "Adrenaline" recordings from Listen and Live Audio. All are collections of excerpts (6 hours, $24.95), and the two newest titles are **Explore: Stories of Survival From Off the Map** and **Dark: Stories of Madness, Murder and the Supernatural**.

Anyone who enjoy's science would like **Pulp Physics** (9 hours, $29.95), Richard Berendzan's engaging discourse on astronomy and related matters. It's an easy-to-grasp, fun presentation.

Another fascinating look back is Stephen Ambrose's **Nothing Like It in the World** (abridged to 6.5 hours, $26, Simon & Schuster), the story of the men who built the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s. It's narrated by Jeffrey DeMunn.

Rich Cohen's **The Avengers: A Jewish War Story** (abridged to 6 hours, $25, New Millennium), read by Larry King, is the story of a band of Jewish guerrillas. In the final days of World War II, they smuggled poison into Nuremberg and managed to kill a few thousand Nazis.

Candlman has released a splendid new recording of an American classic, Zora Neale Hurston's **Their Eyes Were Watching God** (10 hours, $29.95). Ruby Dee read the abridgment long ago, and it was so good, they brought her back for this unabridged version. The recording also includes Hurston's **Mules and Men**.

Golfers will find the audio version of the 1995 book — now a movie — **The Legend of Bagger Vance** way above par. Ronny Cox reads the abridgment (5 hours, $25, Simon & Schuster) of this sports fable, the story of a caddie who knows the secret of the "Authentic Swing."

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